

SECRET OF CONCENTRATION



Swami Purushottamananda

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(For Students)

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Ramakrishna Math
Bangalore 560 019

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SECRET OF CONCENTRATION

They are indeed wise, who know that the secret of success is concentration. To think that it is only the Yogis who need concentration is a gross mistake. Concentration is essential for every person whatever his vocation may be. It is seen that concentration is inherently developed in artisans like blacksmiths, barbers, carpenters, goldsmiths and weavers. If the blacksmith misses his mark while striking with the hammer, even slightly, there is the possibility of crushing his hand. If the barber's razor slips, there is the possible danger of a cut in the skin and blood oozing out. If the carpenter does not have a good hold on his chisel, he will lose his toe. The work of a goldsmith is undoubtedly very dextrous. Weavers can produce clothes of good quality only if they care to keep their eyes fixed on the looms.

But none of these people practised concentration after reading a book or listening to a lecture. The situation created by the demands of their professions has forced the cultivation of concentration in them. What could be that situation? It is the risk of a disaster occurring with the slightest error in their handiworks. All of the above-mentioned are on the brink of danger while they work. Hence they have to work very attentively, restraining their minds. Thereby they would have obtained a form of concentration related to their own occupations. Not only this, there are innumerable examples wherein this type of concentration can be traced to have been passed down the generations. For instance, among apprentices learning smithy in I.T.I.s it is seen that a boy from a blacksmith's family excels in the art. This applies equally to all other vocations. It is rather rarely that one possesses skill in a new craft. Based on

the preceding observations, we come to know the fact that concentration is achieved by continuous striving. This was Lord Krishna's answer to Arjuna's question too: practice results in perfection. What was Arjuna's query? "Krishna, the mind is very fickle; it is endlessly restless. It is powerful too. To keep it under control is equivalent to capturing the wind. How then can such a mind be brought under control?" Lord Krishna replies — "What you say is true, Arjuna. It is a fact that the mind is restless. It is true that to keep it under control is no easy task. But listen to this important revelation: It is equally true that even such a fickle mind can be brought under control by the force of *constant practice and detachment*." Arjuna's question is quite natural and equally simple is Lord Krishna's answer. The problem of the mind's restiveness is not a new thing; it is as old as man himself. However, owing to the

immoral and indisciplined mode of life prevalent today, it might have increased by a certain degree. In fact, Arjuna was a man of courage and righteousness. If such a man's mind could be erratic, what to speak of the unsteadiness of mind of today's pleasure-seeking and indulgent humanity!

Those who are bent upon bringing the mind under control must, first and foremost, clearly understand the nature of the mind they wish to fight with. The mind is as restless as a monkey and as strong as an intoxicated elephant. Controlling it, as said by Arjuna, is like trapping the wind. In regulating the mind, one needs the skill that is necessary in catching monkeys and training elephants.

When Arjuna complained that controlling the mind was very difficult, Lord Krishna did not make light of it and say, "For one like you, who has subdued the most heroic warriors, of what difficulty is the task of

mastering the mind which is, after all, your own? You must be able to handle it as you like!" But instead, understanding the gravity of the problem he says sympathetically: "What you say is true, Arjuna. That the mind is very fickle and that, regulating it is very tough, are both true." The reason for Lord Krishna saying thus is that he knew the nature of the mind. Every animal and thing on earth has a distinct disposition—to blow is the nature of the wind; to burn is the nature of the fire; to flow is the nature of water; likewise, to poke its nose everywhere, to jump about madly, to desire whimsically, to think about a thousand things, to fret over a host of worries, to build castles in the air, to bother about every other work than the one assigned, is the nature of the mind! With surroundings tending to provoke the mind which is by nature restless, what can one do, other than dancing to its tune? Therefore those

who wish to control their minds should keep away from distracting environment. This does not mean that we have to leave the city, but only the *mind* should not be allowed to mingle with the surroundings. How is this done? Here the role of the five sense-organs comes into picture. Eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin—these are the vehicles of the mind. No sooner do the eyes spot something beautiful than the mind leaps straight into it. Thus the senses keep pulling the mind in all directions. Hence it is required to keep the senses under control by applying the intellect. This implies, not seeing what should not be seen; not hearing what should not be heard; not eating what should not be eaten; not doing what should not be done. Doing thus is called ‘Dama’ in Sanskrit. The mind can flow wherever it likes, independently also, without the help of the sense-organs. In such cases the mind should be brought back with the

application of intelligence. This direct method of keeping the mind poised is called 'Shama'.

After coming to know so many details about mind and its concentration, some may ask, 'After all, what is the need to keep the mind under control?' A correct answer to this must be known. The answer is just this: if one's mind is under one's own control, great goals can be achieved through it, while if it is not, it becomes well nigh impossible to do even the most ordinary things. Truly the mind is endowed with tremendous, demoniacal strength. Yet many seem to be weak minded—at times or all through their lives—the reason being that their mental energies have been dissipated indiscriminately. Not all are aware that the sun's rays have the power to ignite fire. Why don't they know? The reason is, they would not have *seen* the sun's rays creating fire and burning down things! But when the same rays are passed through a

convex lens and made to fall on a piece of paper, they can burn the paper. How did the rays acquire this power? It was the result of making them converge, and thereby, 'concentrated'. Earlier, they were scattered in different directions. Hence, even though they could produce heat, they could not burn. But after becoming concentrated they could produce blazing fire. This is a secret to be noted. There lies remarkable power in our minds, intrinsically. Since this energy is being spent on all kinds of necessary and unnecessary matters, we are incapable of doing anything other than only the most commonplace things. If great things are to be achieved, then the distracted energies of the mind should be channelised. This can be done only when our minds are under our own control. But how can the mind be called ours if it madly runs out, unheedingly? The mind that has drowned itself in sensual things, accepting the invitation

of the sense organs, is definitely is not our own. How can we make a mind that is not ours, work as we want?

The first thing that our sages of yore achieved through constant efforts was mental equilibrium by bringing the mind under their control. And when such a mind was made to concentrate, it enabled them to find out the grandest yogic secrets. It brought them nothing less than Divine Knowledge.

As Swami Vivekananda says, a concentrated mind is really a search-light. A search-light makes it possible for us to see even the objects lying in distant, dark corners.

Well, it is true that the mind has to be made to concentrate but what should be the object of concentration? It is not possible to give a specific answer, suitable to all people, at the same time; because, saying that the mind should be concentrated upon the light of the Atman would be absurd since not all

have ventured to become yogis. Nor can it be said that the mind should be concentrated upon God, because, not everybody is a devotee! How about saying that the mind should be concentrated upon lessons? But then, not all are school-going students! So, it would be most appropriate to say that each individual has to personally choose his own particular object of concentration.

But here we shall discuss how students must concentrate their minds upon studies, since this book is especially meant for students.

1. Just as a yogi needs a firm and soft seat to sit upon while meditating, every student must have the facility of a chair and a table to enable him to spread books and study comfortably. A student is akin to a yogi in many respects. The question, 'Where should the large number of poor students seek tables and chairs?' must not be asked here.

Or, 'Did Sir M. Visweswaraiah have a table and a chair during his student-days? Did he not become a world-renowned personality studying under the street light?'—this argument also must not be brought in here. Surely, not all who read under the street lights can become Visweswaraiah. This apart, those who cannot afford a table and a chair must at least have a desk.

2. Having sat down to read or write, one should not shake his body unnecessarily. A large number of students adopt odd postures while sitting down to study. There are others who go on gazing at something or the other, as though engrossed in deep thinking, and chew their pens or pencils while at studies. There are many other such pretentious practices. All these are detrimental to concentration. Even as a shaky vessel disturbs the water contained in it, so too the mind becomes

disturbed when the body keeps changing its postures. Therefore it is important to sit in a dignified and steady posture while studying.

3. That a single topic must be taken up for study at a given time, need not be specially mentioned. However, when a topic has been chosen, the mind should be kept immersed in it for atleast one full hour. Merely reading through a book does not mean one has studied it. One must know the difference between merely reading a book and studying it. But concentration is one thing that is common to both—for reading as well as studying. A cursory reading of the book may enable the reader to know its synopsis. But studying thoroughly will enable the mind to descend into the depths of the contents of the book and grasp their true import, often hidden. This will result in a good command over the subject matter and will also help further reading.

4. Once at the study-table with a topic for study, it is most important that the study be continued for a complete hour as said above. Usually the mind will not be prepared to instantly grasp a new subject. The various works we were engaged in during the course of the day, conversations we had with our friends and others or the thoughts that had occupied our minds just prior to taking up the present study, will still be active within. Hence, for the mind to get ready for the present study, a minimum of eight to ten minutes may be required. If the study is suddenly stopped just when the mind is entering the depths of the subject matter, concentration will be destroyed, and the study damaged. So, after a few minutes when the mind comes to focus, the opportunity should be used for diving deeper and making a profound study. Thus the mind should be applied to uninterrupted study for atleast an hour.

5. During this period, a family-member might call, with a request to attend to some other work. Therefore the inmates of the house must be told previously, “Please do not call me for an hour,” because, the study cannot be carried out with wholesome concentration if even the *expectation* that someone might interrupt lurks in the mind.

6. Then there is the problem of noise pollution. Students amid the serene surroundings of villages are lucky in this matter. But students residing in cities, especially in capitals, have to encounter the evils of noise pollution. Since noise pollution is rampant in all towns and cities, there is no alternative, except to bear with it. However much one tries to adapt to this inconvenience, when the loudspeakers begin to blare, the studies are soon disturbed. While the holy Vinayaka Chathurthi celebrations are in progress, the ears are

assailed by the most rude sounds for a whole month. While the celebrations associated with the Kannada Rajyotsava (in Karnataka) commence another month of deadly din follows. About the Ramanavami celebrations—the less said the better; the students know their plight best. All these constitute some of the hellish experiences of city-dwellers.

The educated members of the society as well as educationists seem to be helpless in this matter. Perhaps the educationists do not possess authority, but then those who wield power do not seem to possess the power of discrimination. Anyhow, there *is* a way of escaping noise pollution—the students must cultivate an intense desire to excel in studies. If there is this yearning in the mind, external noise will hardly be heard. For example, when a worry has overpowered our mind, even if a drum is beaten right beside us, we would not notice it. This yearning or urge is found

to get intensified when the exams have approached. But if we nurture a strong ambition of excelling in the exams even while the exams are a long way off, we can develop a sort of concentration in studies. But it is good to remember that to develop concentration overnight is impossible for anyone.

7. There is yet another scheme whereby concentration in studies can be achieved—it is by paying good *attention* to the subject read. This alertness is called 'Avadhana'. It means keeping the mind wakeful and watchful. Most of the students are incapable of studying with attention because their minds remain suspended in a sort of dream-state or keep wandering aimlessly. Only he whose mind is wakeful succeeds in achieving concentration. Upon reading this, the question—'How then can the mind be kept awake?' may crop up. Some helpful suggestions are given here.

a) The intake of certain kinds of food increases sleepiness. Such food-stuffs must be avoided.

b) The mind will remain energetic when the various organs of the body are kept clean; in addition, all personal things, including bedclothes and the clothing that is daily worn must be tidy.

c) All other things in the room and articles of daily use must be maintained with orderliness. This orderliness reveals the wakeful state of the mind assertively. Carelessness is what is seen in most students. If we look at the chaotic condition of their personal belongings and their books we can easily understand how careless they are.

d) Students should know another important point—it is equally necessary to keep the mind clean. Indecent and vulgar thoughts should not only be denied entry *into*

the mind, but also be prevented from passing in the mind's vicinity, because they are the very culprits who create havoc in the mind and spoil it. It does not matter much even if the mind is drowsy or dreamy, but once such indecency and vulgarity creep into it, there cannot be any talk of concentration. Since concentration comes easily to a pure and unpolluted mind, vicious and sinful thoughts should not be allowed anywhere near the mind.

e) Students must resolve within themselves like this: 'I shall fully study these portions within an hour's time', and feel anxious to complete the study of the portions within the allotted time. It might not be possible to finish the portions within the allotted time in the beginning, but with such eager efforts, possibility of the mind remaining awake increases.

Accordingly, constant efforts to keep the mind awake will help developing concentration to a large extent.

8. Students desirous of developing concentration must desist from gossip, considering it to be as dangerous as poison. However, discussing the lessons with friends is definitely helpful. The Yogis have discovered what a great amount of mental energy is lost through useless prattle. By vain gossip, the discipline and orderliness of the mind will be destroyed. A weak and undisciplined mind will become incapable of concentrating. Concentration is impossible for one with a weak body and a weak mind.

9. Some students complain that when they try to concentrate they get headache. The main reason for this is that their brains do not have sufficient strength. In order to make the brain strong one should practise special

yogasanas under the guidance of an adept. Tonics, chyavanaprasha etc. may be taken along with nourishing food, as directed by a good doctor. Milk, butter and ghee must be taken in right quantities everyday. It is worth remembering that 'too much is too bad'. However, the best tonic is the energy conserved through continence (Brahmacharya). For observing continence a few simple suggestions can be made:

i) One should sincerely pray to his own indwelling Soul in the depth of his heart for sustaining this power of continence.

ii) The body and mind must be always kept pure.

iii) One must be careful not to fall into the company of unruly and indulgent students, as one would keep off tigers and hyenas. However, one should not go to the extent of criticising them, for this would lead to other problems.

10. Another important means, conducive to attainment of concentration is faith—Shraddha. Faith cannot be obtained from outside, it is a virtue that must grow from within. Everybody would have heard the word “faith” sometime or the other. But only a few people have understood its inner import. And, by the power of this faith they have progressed in their chosen paths and reached their goals. Such is the power of faith. It leads the persevering aspirant forward until he reaches his goal. ‘What is this Shraddha that you are making so much of?’—one might ask. Faith is the trust that one has in his own strength. This is what is called ‘Self confidence’. A man might have exceptionally strong biceps, but if he has no faith in their strength, they will be of no use to him. Hanuman was capable of leaping over the ocean but he remained silent since he did not believe that the required strength was there in himself.

But when Jambavantha aroused faith in Hanuman and made his strength known to him, he reached Lanka with one leap!

In every student lies hidden a wonderful capacity for acquiring tremendous knowledge. There is no doubt about this. Only, a student must not doubt his own inner strength. Doubt is the staunch enemy of faith; as soon as any misgiving arises, the inherent strength becomes incapacitated. Afterwards only lamenting over his fate will fall to his lot. How to bring out this inherent knowledge? By studying and thinking regularly and methodically. The student should sit for study with determination resolving, “I will definitely improve my knowledge by studying carefully”. This is an effective technique by which the mind spontaneously gets concentrated. One must try it out to believe it.

Truly, the greatness of faith is boundless. Hence we must keep telling ourselves:

O faith,

Victory is mine if you stand by;

Failure and fall, if you fly away.

11. There is another important key to concentration, the master-key, and that is love. It is an unalterable law that the mind dwells in the objects of its liking. Where there is an excessive love there the mind is united strongly. This point need not be elaborated, because each one can observe how his mind is in close association with his own object of liking. Hence it is essential that a student must develop *love* for his study.

Initially, liking for the lessons will have to be cultivated with some effort. But later, as the subjects become easier to grasp, love springs up naturally. When love for studies develops, concentration is invariably attained.

The concentration that is developed through faith and love is the most natural; it involves no struggle and no strain.

However there is a special suggestion for students. Even though one may be following the eleven precepts mentioned above, concentration can not be said to have been achieved in full measure until the subjects studied become fully understood. Therefore one must not feel sorry and bemoan, “Why have I not achieved concentration yet?” Instead, one must strive to study with patience and understand clearly all that is read. One should not proceed with the reading, for instance, without clearing up the meaning of a difficult word with the help of a dictionary. If reading is done without doing thus, the only ‘outcome’ is waste of time and loss of energy. There is absolutely no benefit. Can the subject matter ever be understood, without an understanding of the difficult words in it?

To know how poor the educational calibre of today’s students is, and more importantly their ability for writing is, they should be

asked to write an essay on some topic. Each page will have a generous quota of defective sentences, words used wrongly and faulty lettering! However intelligent a student might be, without exertion and endeavour, nothing can be achieved.

That is why Lord Krishna says to Arjuna—“Concentration can be accomplished by practice and detachment.” *Practice* implies incessant striving and repeated efforts. Really it is quite difficult for a five year old boy to write a few simple words. But by the time he comes to the tenth standard he will be able to write even long passages effortlessly and fluently. How is this possible? By practice—nothing else. In this world great deeds have been achieved in the past, and are being achieved even now. We should, with an open mind visualize them once. How many people would have struggled persistently for every such accomplishment! There is nothing that

is impossible for men of perseverance.

Now, coming to *detachment*—what does it signify? Does it mean sannyasa—renunciation? No. *Detachment* implies, remaining aloof from all other temptations and attractions while striving to fulfil a chosen aim. That is, to retain interest and concern for the work in hand alone and to remain unconcerned about everything else—this is detachment. Since the goal of monks is self-realization, they have to renounce all the worldly things. And since the word ‘detachment’ has come to mean renunciation, whenever it is used today it is understood as becoming a monk and retiring to the forests. But this is not correct. Anyone engaged in accomplishing a particular goal is detached from other things to some extent. A student is expected to be devoted to the task of acquiring knowledge. But if his mind is being distracted by other temptations, how can his education prosper?

Especially those, who are keen on acquiring concentration, must never even glance at other diversions.

At least after coming to know that there is joy and success in concentration, a student must not remain idle; he must at once apply himself to practise it diligently.

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It is indeed a true sign of concentration if one is absorbed in studies to the extent of forgetting not only the surroundings but even his body!

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If one is desirous to overcome the diseases of his body and to enjoy sound health, if one intends to develop his intelligence, if one is really particular to achieve concentration, he should take recourse to practice of yogasanas. Regular practise of yogasanas strengthens and activates the nervous system

and thereby helps in developing concentration.
Yogasananas are a boon to humanity.

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Minds of the youth are like the Jog Falls. A huge volume of water, gushing down from the heights of a mountain, flows around blindly and at last, having served no purpose, loses its identity in the sea. On the other hand, if a dam is built across its waters and made to flow in regulated canals, agricultural fields can be irrigated and a rich crop harvested.

Similarly, across the uncultured, self-willed mental-energies of the youth, which are spent purposelessly, a dam of disciplines and restrictions must be built; canals of a code of conduct must be dug; and the water of mental powers must be made to flow into the fields of education, art, literature and skilled labour. Then we can see how the glorious harvest of culture will flourish.

WHY DOES A STUDENT LACK CONCENTRATION?

- i) Perhaps he is unable to understand his lessons properly.
- ii) Or, his brain needs to be nourished by nutritious food.
- iii) Or, his family conditions may be the cause of disturbance in his mind.
- iv) Or, he is addicted to T.V. and cinema.
- v) Or, his mind might have started running after sense-pleasure.
- vi) Or, he may be suffering from some chronic disease.
- vii) Or, he lacks the minimum facilities for sitting and studying comfortably and quietly.

- viii) Or, his mind has not grown properly.
- ix) Or, he is put up in a mismanaged hostel.
- x) Or, he has fallen into bad company.
- xi) Or, he does not like his subjects and his interest lies in something else.

When the cause of the problems is spotted out, finding a remedy will not be a problem.



I am sure that the “Letter to A Student” by the same author will have roused your enthusiasm to become a good student, and then, a great student. A student (‘Vidyarthi’) is one who earnestly desires to acquire knowledge and wisdom. This can be done only when the art of concentration has been mastered. This little book, a companion volume to the former, helps you to achieve it. Now, study it, implement the ideas given, acquire knowledge and be **HAPPY!**

— Swami Harshananda



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